

THE MAY 1948 VOTE THAT MADE THE STATE OF ISRAEL

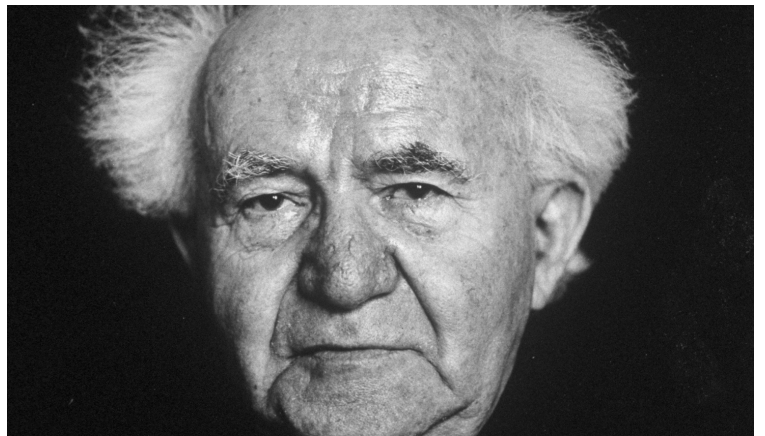
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A long-accepted wisdom has it that just days before the state's birth, its founders settled two burning issues in a pair of closely decided votes. The wisdom is half-wrong.

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Israel's 70th anniversary, which falls on April 19 (by the Hebrew calendar), coincides with a resurgence of interest in David Ben-Gurion, Israel's founding father. In addition to new biographies, most notably by Anita Shapira (2014) and Tom Segev (Hebrew, 2018), the Ben-Gurion revival probably owes most to a 2016 film, *Ben-Gurion, Epilogue*, directed by Yariv Mozer. Made up mostly of excerpts from a long-lost film interview given by Ben-Gurion in 1968, during his twilight years, the documentary ran in Israeli theaters and on TV and was screened by almost every Jewish film festival worldwide.



A portrait of David Ben-Gurion taken in the 1960s. Horst Tappe/Pix Inc./The LIFE Images Collection/Getty Images.

At the time of the 1968 interview, Ben-Gurion was eighty-two and living in Sde Boker, a desert kibbutz where he did chores like any other member. Notwithstanding the occasional pronouncement, often in a prophetic register, he'd faded from public life. Friends looked for ways to mitigate his isolation and boredom; politicians mostly ignored him. Most of his biographers would concur with Tom Segev: "Ben-Gurion's old age was sad, degrading, superfluous. . . . Like many people, he lived a few years too long."

Which makes it strange to see a new generation embracing this late-life Ben-Gurion—or perhaps not so strange. He lived long enough, after all, to witness the June 1967 war, and then to issue opinions about what should be done with the territories Israel occupied in that war. There will always be those who, to clinch a present-day argument, resort to citing a long-dead “founding father,” and *Ben-Gurion, Epilogue* supplies one very useful quotation. In the documentary, Ben-Gurion says: “If I could choose between peace and all the territories that we conquered last year [in the Six-Day War], I would prefer peace.” (He made exceptions for Jerusalem and the Golan Heights.)

Not surprisingly, this provided the theme for most of the press commentary about the film and for its reviews. “Ben-Gurion Favors West Bank Withdrawal in Footage from 1968,” proclaimed the headline of the Jewish Telegraphic Agency. *Screen Daily* went so far as to claim (erroneously) that he had predicated peace with the Arabs upon Israel’s withdrawal from “all of the territories” it conquered in 1967.

Thus did the film deliberately summon forth Ben-Gurion’s ghost for a contemporary purpose. “It’s not a film about history, it’s not a nostalgic film,” its director has said. “It’s a film relevant to Israel today.” According to the official synopsis, Ben-Gurion’s “clear voice provides a surprising vision for today’s crucial decisions and the future of Israel.”

But does it, really? It would be an elementary mistake to allow his “clear voice” *circa* 1968 to muffle his even clearer voice *circa* 1948, when he was at the height of his powers, both political and analytical. At Israel’s very birth, Ben-Gurion not only advocated territorial acquisition in war. He also fostered the conviction that Israel shouldn’t finalize its borders.

Nor was this just a personal preference. Ben-Gurion put the issue to a vote of the yishuv’s leaders. If any vote may be said to have made the new state of Israel, it would be this one. It was closely contested—decided, indeed, by a margin of one.

Unfortunately, beyond a small circle of Israeli historians, the details of this vote are little known—the reason being that 1948 was a year of war, and most histories of 1948 are military rather than political histories. (Both Dan Kurzman’s *Genesis 1948* and Benny Morris’s *1948*, for example, share the same subtitle, “The First Arab-Israeli War,” and both are decidedly military histories.) Then, too, there had been the very public November 1947 vote in the United Nations General Assembly for the partition of Palestine into two states, which had provided a spectacle of high drama before the cameras as well as much lore about behind-the-scene maneuvering.

But while the UN vote licensed the creation of a Jewish state, the UN failed to act to implement its own decision. So it was the voting of the Zionist leaders themselves, behind closed doors, that was both crucial and decisive in the establishment of the state.

The voting took place on May 12, 1948, three days before the end of the British mandate, in the

People's Administration, a kind of proto-cabinet. But here things become complicated. The standard story has it that a vote was held on whether to accept a truce in the fighting already raging between the Arabs and the Jews. That would have delayed the declaration of a state, perhaps indefinitely. Then a second vote was held on the question of whether the new state should announce its borders.

The UN partition plan included a map, but Israel's founders decided that it wouldn't bind them. Ben-Gurion came to regard this vote as one of his greatest political triumphs.

As we shall see, the story of the first vote has almost entirely overshadowed the story of the second. Yet, as we shall also see, the evidence that the first vote even took place is questionable. Not so for the second vote, in which, by five to four, the founders deliberately declined to be bound by the map of the Jewish state that had been included in the UN partition plan, or to delineate any borders for the state at all. Ben-Gurion himself came to regard this latter vote as among his greatest political triumphs, and one he underlined time and time again.

Let's begin with a sketch of the background.

I. November 1947–May 12, 1948

Tucked in a residential side street near the Habimah Theater in Tel Aviv is the Jewish National Fund House. Built in the late 1930s in the Bauhaus style, for the last 30 years the structure has served as an educational center and museum. It doesn't appear in most guidebooks because it's open only to groups. Most Israelis and tourists who want to learn about Israel's beginnings never visit it, instead finding their way to a building, now known as Independence Hall, on Rothschild Boulevard. There, on May 14, 1948, the cameras would record Ben-Gurion's solemn declaration of the state and the festive signing ceremony.

But before Israel could be proclaimed, it had to be born. That birth took place in the Jewish National Fund House. During the month prior to the state's declaration, the building hosted the People's Administration, the proto-cabinet, and the People's Council, a kind of proto-parliament, both of them established by order of the Zionist Executive on April 12, 1948 in anticipation of the end of the mandate. It was exactly one month later, May 12, in a second-floor meeting room, that ten of the thirteen members of the People's Administration met in a marathon session to decide upon a course of action.

Those around the table that day had witnessed too much Jewish history. They had seen the population of the yishuv grow tenfold in 30 years—but had also seen the Jewish people in Europe almost totally destroyed in fewer than five. And in the past year alone, history's wheel had started to turn again. In February 1947, Britain announced that it would be leaving Palestine, and then handed over the question of the country's future to the United Nations. In November, the UN General Assembly, by a two-thirds majority, passed the partition resolution.

Most of the yishuv rejoiced at November's UN vote: since the time of Herzl, the creation of a Jewish state had been *the* dream and aim of political Zionism. Now it seemed within grasp. But Palestine's Arabs, supported by Arabs elsewhere, rejected the resolution root and branch. From November onward, a civil war raged between Jews and Arabs even as the British prepared for their final departure, which they had set for the following May 15.

As the Jews began to gird themselves for a great battle, many in the international community grew alarmed at the intensified violence. Their alarm grew when Arab states announced that they would come to the aid of the Palestinian Arabs once the British left. A regional war now seemed likely, and no one could be certain how it might end. And so, by the spring of 1948, some of the governments that had supported partition began to backtrack.

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Of these, the most important was the United States. As early as November 1947, the CIA had estimated that even if the Jews might at first seem to be winning, eventually they would lose:

The Jewish forces will initially have the advantage. However, as the Arabs gradually coordinate their war effort, the Jews will be forced to withdraw from isolated positions, and having been drawn into a war of attrition, will gradually be defeated. Unless they are able to obtain significant outside aid in terms of manpower and matériel, the Jews will be able to hold out no longer than two years.

The fear was that, in this eventuality, the United States would come under political pressure to save the yishuv, an enterprise that according to the Pentagon would require at least 50,000 American troops. Would it not be better to forestall such an outcome by aborting the partition plan and putting the country under a "temporary" UN trusteeship, preceded by a UN-sponsored cease-fire? The mandate could thus be prolonged, and a Jewish state deferred. "With such a truce and such a trusteeship," announced President Harry Truman in March, "a peaceful settlement is yet possible; without them, open warfare is just over the horizon"—and that warfare would "infect the entire Middle East."

Right up to the eve of the British departure, therefore, the United States pressed the leaders of

the yishuv, as well as its American Zionist supporters, to accept the trusteeship proposal, or at least the UN-sponsored truce. Most famously, on May 8, 1948, U.S. Secretary of State George Marshall, a skeptic on Jewish statehood, met in Washington with the shadow foreign minister of Israel, Moshe Shertok (later Sharett). Marshall began by acknowledging that the Jewish forces had won an initial string of victories—consolidating their hold on most of the territory allotted to the Jewish state and a few areas allotted to the Arab state as well—but dismissed this as but a “temporary success.” In the longer run, he warned Shertok, there was “no assurance” that fortune might not turn against the Jews.

“I told Mr. Shertok,” Marshall reported to President Truman,

that they were taking a gamble. If the tide did turn adversely and they came running to us for help they should be placed clearly on notice now that there was no warrant to expect help from the United States, which had warned them of the grave risk which they were running.

Marshall’s message came through loud and clear: postpone your state, and accept a truce. (The Americans spoke of a three-month cease-fire.) If you roll the dice, and you lose, don’t expect salvation from us.

II. The Lore Surrounding 1948

According to the lore that would surround 1948, warnings like Marshall’s plunged some leaders of the yishuv into doubt. After all, until now the yishuv had faced only Palestinian Arab militias. If the Zionists declared a state, they would face invasion by Arab states like Egypt, Transjordan, and Iraq, fielding conventional military forces armed and trained by the British over many years. The prospect of such all-out war was frightening, and here the Americans were proposing a truce; would it perhaps be sensible to accept it?

The most prominent waverer, according to lore, was Shertok himself. Marshall had made him doubt the wisdom of declaring the state—so it was said—and he’d arrived back in Tel Aviv on May 11, straight from Washington, opposed to such a declaration. But (the story goes on) the resolute Ben-Gurion practically abducted him from the airport on arrival, got him behind a locked door, and made him promise to keep his opinion to himself lest his flagging infect others.

Did some yishuv leaders need to have their spines stiffened by a resolute Ben-Gurion? The story has an almost biblical ring to it.

The story has an almost biblical ring to it. Is it true? Supporting it is a supposed statement by Ben-Gurion many years after the fact. But the historical consensus today holds otherwise: the preponderance of evidence shows that Shertok's resolve remained steady, and the story of his bending in the wind was exaggerated if not contrived by later opponents who sought to smear him as a man of little faith in his people. Indeed, on May 7, the day before their meeting, Shertok wrote to Marshall to clarify that "I see no prospect of an agreement which would preclude the setting up of a Provisional Government for the Jewish State." In the next day's meeting, without antagonizing Marshall by bluntly telling him "no," he had been at pains to insist that there would be no retreat:

We stand on the threshold of fulfilling the hope of centuries, the culmination of an enterprise in which generations have sunk their efforts. This is within our grasp. For us to agree to any delay, without any certainty that this [state] would arise after the delay, would oblige us to stand in judgment before Jewish history, which we cannot do under any circumstances. . . . The process of territorial and functional taking-over was in full swing. Any leadership that tries to break this momentum would be swept from the stage.

Upon his return home, Shertok saw it as his duty to report Marshall's warnings to Ben-Gurion and his colleagues, both in the Mapai party and in the People's Administration. But he also made it plain that Marshall hadn't banged his fist on the table. In Shertok's telling, Marshall had flashed Israel not a red light but a yellow one, while other, friendlier figures in Washington were flashing green. The sum effect of his messaging was not to exacerbate any doubts that other yishuv leaders might have had but to ease them.

If this has been obscured in later years, it is because, as Ben-Gurion and Shertok grew apart, the story of the latter's wavering, retailed by the former's supporters, grew in the telling—causing Shertok no small amount of personal grief. "This lie," he complained to his diary in 1957, "which resurfaces from time to time, pursues me all these years. What can I do? Deny again?"

But this pertains to the much later history of Israeli political rivalries. What is important is that on the morning of May 12, 1948, when the members of the People's Administration took their seats around the table, Ben-Gurion and Shertok were broadly aligned.

III. Thirteen Hours

What exactly happened in that thirteen-hour meeting? For the first 30 years after independence, the most thorough account was that prepared by a little-remembered man named Zeev Sharef. Regarded in his day as Israel's "number-one civil servant," Sharef had

orchestrated the bureaucratic transition to statehood. He then served as Israel's first cabinet secretary from 1948 to 1957, and from the 1960s as a cabinet minister, holding the portfolios of commerce and industry, housing, and (briefly) finance. He also implemented the first overhaul of Israel's internal-revenue system.

It was Sharef (with the help of two stenographers) who kept the minutes of the May 12 meeting of the People's Administration. Later these minutes would serve him as a partial basis for a book on the birth of Israel entitled *Three Days* (1959; English translation 1962). Since, at the time, the classified minutes had not yet been released, the relevant chapters of Sharef's book (in the section entitled "The First Day") were long considered the insider source for the events of May 12.

Those chapters (like the minutes themselves) are at times confusing, perhaps because, as Sharef writes, "neither the subject matter nor the agenda [of the meeting] had been determined in advance—[instead,] the agenda developed out of the proceedings" as the meeting, chaired by Ben-Gurion, wandered from subject to subject. But some of the major highlights as recounted in the book would become famous.

For example, there was a report by Golda Meyerson (later Meir) on her secret meeting the previous day in Amman with King Abdullah of Transjordan. The bottom line: the king would be joining in the war. "I am very sorry," she quoted him as saying, apologetically: "I deplore the coming bloodshed and destruction." Then Shertok briefed the meeting on the American position. His bottom line: people in the know in Washington had reassured him that Marshall didn't have the final word, and the yishuv "shouldn't compromise and shouldn't fear."

Causing deep unease was the military briefing by Yigal Sukenik (later Yadin). As chief of military operations for the Haganah, and later to become the IDF's chief of staff, Sukenik assessed that if the Arab armies invaded, "the chances are very much equal" (others would translate that to mean "50-50"). But, he continued, "if I am to be candid, the [enemy's] advantage is large, if they bring all their fighting force to bear." Ben-Gurion asked whether a truce would be advisable militarily; Sukenik said yes, it could be, but only if the time could be exploited to prepare for the next round.

The situation of the Jews in besieged Jerusalem also prompted concern. Not only were they cut off (indeed, two members of the People's Administration were unable to make it to the meeting in Tel Aviv), but the Transjordanian Arab Legion had laid siege to nearby Gush Etzion. In fact it would fall the next day, and its defenders would be massacred—the first decisive loss to an invading force.

Ben-Gurion gave a presentation that seemed at first to echo Sukenik's doubts. There would be more battlefield defeats and losses, he said, and these might undermine morale. Central command was weak. But he then laid out the conditions for victory. If manpower, planes, and guns could be mobilized, "it won't be the 'picnic' to which the yishuv has become accustomed

lately, but from the perspective of our dynamism . . . we can overcome.” A truce within Palestine would only hinder the Jews’ needed mobilization, while the neighboring Arab states would be free to arm and prepare. His bottom line: “I don’t see any advantage to a truce.”

Sharef himself points to the meandering character of the discussion: “Actually, consideration of an epochal and fateful issue [of declaring the state] was interwoven into the discussion on [a cease-fire in] Jerusalem.” And “the question of whether to accept the American truce proposal at the UN was intercalated into the discussion on the creation of the state.” Every issue, when raised, seemed to bleed into another one, over which opinions divided differently.

“A vote was taken. It was decided by six to four to reject the proposal for a truce.” This is the account that went down in history.

But then, according to Sharef’s book, the meeting came to a decisive culmination in a vote “by a simple show of hands by all ten members of the [People’s] Administration present at the meeting”:

A vote was taken. It was decided by six to four to reject the proposal for a truce. Acceptance would imply postponing the declaration of the state. Rejection, by the raising of hands, meant *ipso facto* that in two days’ time the state would come into formal being, within the comity of nations.

And this is the account that went down “in history” as the standard version. Over the decades, Israelis would encounter it in a vast array of canonical sources, from the authorized account of the 1948 war, *Sefer Toldot Ha-haganah* (*The History of the Haganah*, part 3), to the 1981 documentary film series *Amud Ha-esh* (*Pillar of Fire*, episode 19). Ben-Gurion’s biographers, most notably Michael Bar-Zohar, Dan Kurzman, and Shabtai Teveth, also told the same story, with various degrees of embellishment.

Other historians would add details that cast the vote in an even more dramatic light. Zeev Tzachor, Ben-Gurion’s last private secretary, and later a historian at Ben-Gurion University, claimed that nine of the ten members entered the meeting leaning toward delay—and that only Ben-Gurion thought otherwise:

This was Ben-Gurion’s finest hour. Four of the ten didn’t budge from their opposition to the declaration (including two from Mapai, his own party), but he persuaded the other five, who had either wavered or opposed the declaration, and they backed his position. Now there were six supporters against four opponents. The American proposal was rejected.

Ben-Gurion thus won this “dramatic vote, perhaps the most important in our history,” and he won it alone.

The story is also repeated, with variations, in just about every standard English-language history of Israel's birth, from best-selling journalists like Dan Kurzman in *Genesis 1948* (1970) and Larry Collins and Dominique Lapierre in *O Jerusalem!* (1972) to scholars like Martin Gilbert in *Israel: A History* (1998), Anita Shapira in *Israel: A History* (2012), and Daniel Gordis in *Israel: A Concise History of a Nation Reborn* (2016). Here are excerpts:

- Kurzman (who admits to “using the techniques of the novelist”):

“And now we will vote on whether to accept the armistice proposal,” Ben-Gurion declared. Had he made them understand? Could they hear the whispers of the fainthearted millions who had perished? . . . When the vote was taken, Ben-Gurion announced the result with the same calm he might have shown in setting the date for the next meeting. Six of the ten council members present had voted to reject the truce plan. Ben-Gurion glanced with the faintest smile at Shertok, who had cast the deciding vote. A state would be proclaimed.

- Collins and Lapierre, in a chapter entitled “By Just One Vote”:

Transfixed by the magnetic personality of their chief, the other leaders fell silent. . . . At his call for those in favor of accepting the truce, Ben-Gurion saw four hands go up. The motion had failed by just one vote. On that one vote had hung the rebirth of the Jewish state.

- Gilbert, in a book published on Israel's 50th anniversary:

By six votes to four, the proposal [in favor of postponement] was rejected. . . . Midnight had come and gone. A historic decision had been made. A Jewish state—the first for 2,000 years—would come into being,

- Shapira:

The discussion was protracted. . . . In the end the decision was six to four to declare statehood, with Ben-Gurion putting all his weight behind it. The council members were taking a tremendous gamble.

- Gordis:

Ben-Gurion . . . adamantly opposed any delay. . . . Yet some members of the yishuv's leadership disagreed. . . . Ben-Gurion insisted that for Jewish sovereignty it might be “now or never” . . . By a slim margin of 6-4, the People's Administration voted in Tel Aviv on May 12, 1948, to declare the first sovereign Jewish state since Judea had fallen two millennia earlier.

And this is just a sampling; the story has been endlessly repeated because its drama is simply

irresistible. Indeed, it is a modern iteration of the story of Exodus, with Ben-Gurion in the role of Moses, prodding doubters to believe in themselves and defy the dangers on the route to freedom in their own land.

IV. A Seed of Doubt

And yet one person—David Ben-Gurion—never repeated the story, and historians who sought confirmation from him came away empty-handed. In his laconic diary entry for the day itself, Ben-Gurion didn't mention this vote. "In the afternoon, a meeting of the People's Administration," he wrote:

It was decided to declare statehood and a Provisional Government at four in the afternoon on Friday. Only [Peretz] Bernstein [of the General Zionists] suggested that we just declare the [Provisional] Government.

In 1961, after publication of Sharef's book, an interviewer pressed Ben-Gurion: would he name those who opposed the immediate declaration of the state? "I prefer not to deal with this question. There are minutes of the People's Administration . . . and they provide the answer to this question." But would he endorse Sharef's account? Sharef was "generally" accurate, Ben-Gurion allowed, but he couldn't confirm "all the details."

In 1968, a young graduate student, Mordechai Naor, met with Ben-Gurion at Sde Boker and subsequently wrote him asking for the names of those who had voted for and against the truce. Sharef hadn't named them, he said, and while some historians had guessed their identities, they didn't all agree. Ben-Gurion replied:

I am not familiar with this at all, and in the minutes in my possession there is no such resolution, and I do not know on what basis you believe that six voted against it and four in favor. Therefore I cannot tell you the names of those against and those in favor, because there was no vote.

Naor did not publish this letter until many years later.

Then, in 1971, the multi-volume *Encyclopedia Judaica* appeared, and it included an entry on the "Israel Declaration of Independence" written by none other than Ben-Gurion himself. Once more, Ben-Gurion made no mention of any truce vote. But, as also in his reply to Naor, he did confirm the later vote, in which it was decided to exclude from the declaration any mention of borders.

The most important piece of evidence appeared five years later. In his letter to Naor, Ben-Gurion had mentioned "the minutes in my possession." These classified minutes were finally

published on Israel's 30th anniversary in 1978, after Ben-Gurion's death. It turned out that he was right about them: the six-to-four vote against the truce (and, by implication, in favor of declaring the state immediately) is nowhere to be found; only the later vote, on whether to specify the state's borders, is recorded in the minutes.

Of course, much of what was *said* during thirteen hours of deliberations could not have been reported in only 119 pages of typed minutes. Sharef included what he thought was important. But even if some arguments fell by the editorial wayside, how could the vote over postponement have been omitted—especially since the same minutes duly recorded the details of the other vote?

Publication of the minutes thus planted a seed of doubt. Some historians nevertheless decided to prefer Sharef's book of 1959 to the minutes composed by him in 1948. After all, when he published his book, eight of the ten participants were still alive, some even active in politics, and Sharef himself was still a civil servant. Would he have dared to risk his position by fabricating the story of a split vote if there had been none? Also, some participants—notably, Mordechai Bentov and Aharon Zisling (both of Mapam, a socialist party to the left of Ben-Gurion's Mapai)—reassured historians that there had indeed been such a vote. If so, then perhaps Sharef had simply struck it from the minutes because Ben-Gurion, eyeing posterity, wanted to minimize the depth of internal divisions.

This speculation, presuming a sort of soft conspiracy, allowed historians to continue telling the story as they always had. But seeds of doubt have a way of germinating.

An early dissenting voice was that of the military historian Meir Pa'il in his 1983 contribution to the monumental *Historiah shel Eretz-Israel (History of the Land of Israel, volume 10)*. There he wrote that the People's Administration "reached a general agreement, *without a vote*, to declare an independent state upon the British evacuation" (emphasis added).

“Sharef was astonished and at a loss when he examined the minutes and discovered he had erred,” wrote an Israeli historian who confronted him.

Another historian, Yoram Nimrod, reached the same conclusion, and even went to Sharef to confront him with the minutes. “Sharef was astonished and at a loss when he examined the minutes and discovered he had erred,” wrote Nimrod. “We discussed this a few times, without reaching a solution, but by the time I found a reasonable explanation and asked to present it to him, he had fallen ill and died shortly afterward.”

In Nimrod's own posthumously published thesis (which finally appeared in 2000), he became the first to assert unequivocally that the alleged vote never occurred, and to attempt to explain the discrepancy. In 1998, Israeli state television broadcast the controversial series

T'kumah (“Resurrection”) on the history of Israel. Here, for the first time, a wider public would have heard this:

Contrary to the accepted version, there was no vote on whether or not to declare political independence. The only question on which the members voted was whether to define the borders of the state according to the [UN] partition plan. By a majority of five to four, it was decided not to include the matter of the borders in the declaration.

Later, in 2005, the historian Yigal Eilam (who had been a consultant for *T'kumah*) published a detailed article aggressively accusing some historians of “laziness” in accepting the “myth” of the dramatic vote. He, too, tried to explain why the “myth” arose—his theory: Sharef became confused—and why the vote wasn’t necessary in the first place.

By now, the seed of doubt was in full flower. But because Nimrod and Eilam were regarded as gadflies, some dismissed their version as a post-Zionist assault on a story of heroic Zionist leadership—in this case, Ben-Gurion’s. (This, despite Eilam’s insistence that, in his eyes, his correction of the record “doesn’t detract in the least from the historic value of Ben-Gurion and the importance of the role he played at that moment.”)

It was only in the wake of this controversy that the dissenting version finally received a major endorsement from the “establishment.” Mordechay Naor, the one-time student who had asked Ben-Gurion about the vote, had gone on to a prolific career, even serving as chairman of the public council of Independence Hall. In 2006, he finally published Ben-Gurion’s letter to him and stated his own view plainly: “I wish to add my own humble voice to those who deny that any vote was taken.”

Naor later assumed the task of preparing an authoritative account of the declaration co-sponsored by Independence Hall. Published in 2014, and [promoted](#) on the official website of Independence Hall in both Hebrew and English, it includes a facsimile of Ben-Gurion’s letter along with Naor’s reiterated view that the vote never took place.

V. No Decision Was Needed

It might be asked: why *didn’t* the vote on declaring statehood take place? The answer: by May 12, the day of the People’s Administration meeting, there was no decision left to make.

First, a decision to declare independence as of May 15 had already been taken in Tel Aviv a month earlier by the Zionist Executive Council, the highest body of the Zionist Organization. This “Declaration of Political Independence,” issued on April 12, was largely written by

Zalman Rubashov (later Shazar, future third president of Israel), who read it aloud in a dramatic midnight session:

The Zionist Executive Council, the highest body of the world Zionist movement, declares today its decision to establish in the country the high authority of our political independence. . . . Immediately upon the end of the mandate, and no later than May 16, there will come into being a Jewish provisional government.

It was precisely to implement this decision that the Zionist Executive, in the same declaration, created the People's Administration. Although the April text wasn't free of ambiguities, Ben-Gurion would insist in the May 12 meeting that "we already have a decision, taken in the Zionist Executive Council, that the state will begin to function on May 16, with the end of the mandate—that is, after May 15!"

All in the room knew that if *they* didn't declare the state, someone else would: Menachem Begin.

Second, all in the room knew that if *they* didn't declare the state, someone else would. In his book, Sharef noted the sense around the table that "any deferment might provoke internal dissension, which would be likely to impair the yishuv's combative mood and the morale of its troops." This "internal dissension" had an unspoken name: Menachem Begin, leader of the Irgun, who had promised to declare a state if the People's Administration didn't.

In early May, Begin had published a notice including precisely this warning:

The Hebrew government will be established. There is no maybe—it will rise. If the official leadership establishes a government, we will back it. But if the government gives in to threats, our forces and the majority of the land's youth will back the free government that will grow from the underground.

Begin thus prepared two alternative messages for broadcast on May 16: the first, professing loyalty to the state if Ben-Gurion declared one; the second, declaring a state himself if Ben-Gurion did not. Everyone in the room knew Begin's intent. Bechor-Shalom Sheetrit (representing the Sephardim) put it bluntly: "We are alert to the street and we know the mood there. And if we now seem to go soft and retreat from what the street hopes from us, we'll unleash war in the street."

Third, no one believed that the Arabs would accept a truce in any case. This was "one point which won common assent," recalled Sharef. While Ben-Gurion outlined the disadvantages of a truce, he never let his listeners forget that discussion of it was entirely hypothetical, since no Arab partner existed. Peretz Bernstein (General Zionists) made the argument even more forcefully:

If I thought a truce was realistic, I'd be ready to consider it. . . . But there is no force that can guarantee it. . . . Who can promise and what guarantee could be given that the truce won't be violated? . . . If the neighboring countries have decided to invade, they won't stop just because we cancel the declaration. Neither the English nor the Americans have the power to prevent this [invasion], if it is as imminent as they think. . . . And if we now say that while yesterday we wanted the state but today we say there is no declaration and there is a truce, this will be an additional rationale for [the Arab states] to invade.

But fourth, and above all, there was no firm opposition to a declaration because the Jewish public and the Hebrew press expected and even demanded one. The yishuv by this point in time was a coiled spring. This is what Shertok meant when he told Secretary of State Marshall that "it was impossible to break the momentum." Aharon Zisling (Mapam) extended the argument to include Jews everywhere:

The Jews are now united as never before. The splits of the past (and there were such splits) will widen, not narrow, if we wait. When we are at war, the splits diminish. . . . We are at the pinnacle of the ascent, beyond which there is no further ascent, only descent. We are liable to exhaust this force, and then we won't benefit from its full power.

Besides, how could the yishuv's leaders hesitate when, as Shertok informed the meeting, even the cautious Chaim Weizmann was clamoring for statehood "now or never"?

So the ten wise men (plus Golda Meyerson, an observer) deliberated and debated, and some gave voice to their nagging doubts, but there was nothing to decide. As another witness, the economist David Horowitz who later founded the Bank of Israel, would write in his memoirs:

There was no other real alternative course. It seemed that the narrow path on which we trod hadn't been chosen by us of our own free will, but was imposed upon us by hidden forces, over which we had no influence.

Instead of a vote, the participants drifted into a legalistic discussion of whether to declare a "state" or a "government." It was a distinction without much of a difference, and the consensus (Sharef called it a "tacit agreement") settled on the state.

There will always be a margin of uncertainty about the proceedings of May 12, but the truth probably most closely conforms to the description given by Shertok in his autobiographical anthology *B'sha'ar Ha-ummot* ("At the Gate of Nations," 1956): "The decision to declare independence on Friday May 14, 1948 was taken *unanimously* in the session of the People's Administration on May 12" (emphasis added).

Will it ever be remembered mostly as Shertok described it? That still seems unlikely. The persistence of the more dramatic story of a split vote rests on its emotional appeal. But that is

unfortunate. For one thing, by elevating Ben-Gurion to the stature of a Moses leading a fear-struck flock, it downplays the grit and fortitude of the 600,000-strong yishuv, which was steeling itself precisely for just such a day. For another, the legend of the split vote occludes the reality of the vote that did take place—and that exercised a lasting impact on Israel's future.

VI. The Vote that Did Occur

The real choice the People's Administration faced wasn't whether to declare a state, but what sort of state to declare. Would it be a state within the borders of the UN partition plan of the previous November? Or would it be a state whose borders would be determined by the fortunes of war?

Six months earlier, the yishuv had hailed the UN vote as the greatest Zionist achievement since the Balfour Declaration of 1917. Despite deep reservations about the resolution's map, the mainstream Zionist leadership had accepted the plan in its totality. "We were resigned in 1947 to receiving the rump end of Palestine," Ben-Gurion later recalled,

in accordance with the United Nations settlement. We didn't think that settlement very fair since we knew that our work here deserved a greater assignment of land. We didn't, however, press the point and prepared to abide scrupulously to the international ruling come the day of our independence.

Over the following months, even as international support for implementation of the UN plan eroded, Zionists clung to it all the more tenaciously. It was their anchor against the shifting currents of policy in Washington, London, and Moscow. As the mandate wound down, Zionists insisted that, to the extent possible in light of Arab rejection, the plan be honored to the letter.

So when the May 12 meeting took up the content of the declaration, there arose this question: what sort of reference should be made to the UN partition plan? Having insisted that others hew to the plan, could the Zionist movement do otherwise? Would, for instance, the Jewish state be declared "in the framework" of the plan? That would be the most legitimate form, and the one likeliest to win international recognition for the new state.

But it also posed a dilemma. On the one hand, a declaration of total adherence to the UN plan would imply acceptance of its map; on the other hand, a declaration that the state was established only "on the basis" of the UN partition plan would imply a diminished commitment to that map. The dilemma was acute because in the intervening fighting the Jews had already occupied some territory, mostly to relieve isolated and besieged settlements,

that the UN plan had assigned to the proposed Arab state. Should the Jews seek to reassure the international community that they weren't bent on expansion? Or should they prepare the case for possible annexation?

The Berlin-born Felix Rosenblueth (later Pinhas Rosen) was a member of the People's Administration (New Aliyah party). A jurist, he would later become Israel's first minister of justice, a portfolio he would hold three times. Some weeks earlier, he had assumed responsibility for drafting a declaration of statehood.

In the May 12 session, Rosenblueth insisted that the state be declared "in the framework" of the UN partition plan and that its borders be defined accordingly. As a matter of law, he contended, "it is impossible not to treat borders." He had also distributed in advance a proposed draft in which the People's Council "declares a free, sovereign Jewish state in the borders set forth in the resolution of the UN General Assembly of November 29, 1947."

Bechor-Shalom Sheetrit, a lawyer and judge (and future minister of police), supported Rosenblueth with a legal argument of his own:

Regarding borders, I agree with Rosenblueth. It's not credible to declare an authority without defining its scope. This can draw us into complications. . . . What the state publishes is the law in the territory of the state. . . . When a state arises, it declares the limits of its borders.

This was just the sort of moment Ben-Gurion knew how to seize. In a rebuttal described by Sharef as "trenchant," Ben-Gurion took strong exception to the arguments of Rosenblueth and Sheetrit. "If we decide not to say 'borders,' then we won't say it," he countered. To begin with, there was no legal requirement to specify them:

This is a declaration of independence. For example, there is the American Declaration of Independence. It includes no mention of territorial definitions. There is no need and no law such as that. I, too, learned from law books that a state is made up of territory and population. Every state has borders. [But] we are talking about a declaration [of independence], and whether borders must or mustn't be mentioned. I say, there's no law such as that. In a declaration establishing a state, there is no need to specify the territory of the state.

"In a declaration establishing a state," Ben-Gurion maintained, "there is no need to specify the territory of the state."

And Ben-Gurion went further. The UN, by doing nothing to implement its plan, and the Arabs, by declaring war on Israel, had torn up the UN map. In these circumstances, expansion beyond the partition borders would be entirely legitimate:

Why not mention [borders]? Because we don't know [what will happen]. If the UN stands its ground, we won't fight the UN. But if the UN doesn't act, and [the Arabs] wage war against us and we thwart them, and we then take the western Galilee and both sides of the corridor to Jerusalem, all this will become part of the state, if we have sufficient force. Why commit ourselves?

Ben-Gurion then did something he hadn't done during the entire session: he called for a vote. "Who favors including the issue of the borders in the declaration?" Four raised their hands. "And who is opposed?" Five. "*Resolved*," read the minutes, "not to include the issue of the borders in the declaration." (The minutes didn't specify how the individual members voted, and one of them must have abstained. Twenty years later, Ben-Gurion couldn't remember the precise breakdown.)

Why did Ben-Gurion call for a vote? It's a matter of conjecture. Clearly he thought the issue was of cardinal importance. He probably also thought he had to break the momentum built by Rosenblueth, a formidable legal authority.

And it wasn't just Rosenblueth: the Jewish Agency had consistently reassured foreign governments that the new state wouldn't deviate from the partition map. As the U.S. consul in Jerusalem reported the following day, May 13, "Jewish Agency officials have steadfastly maintained their intention to remain within the UN boundaries." If this "intention" were to make its way into Israel's foundational document, it would be impossible to amend it later.

Where exactly might the Jewish state seek to amend the borders stipulated by the partition plan? Ben-Gurion mentioned inclusion of the Jerusalem corridor and the western Galilee, but these were only two examples. In later years, in recalling his rationale, he would emphasize its more general character: "I said: let's assume that during a war we capture Jaffa, Ramleh, Lydda, the Jerusalem corridor, and the western Galilee, and that we want to hold onto them. Well, it just so happens that we did take these places!" Ben-Gurion wanted the vote as a license to incorporate any strategically vital territory seized in war with an Arab aggressor.

The May 12 decision thus set Israel on course to replace the partition map with another map. And the vote was an achievement in which Ben-Gurion took pride. He never claimed credit for turning the tide in favor of independence, but he would consistently claim credit for the vote on the borders. And in the telling, he would always make sure to mention that while his own law studies had been aborted by war in 1914, he had prevailed over the jurist Rosenblueth and the judge Sheetrit. It was as though he wanted to show that by his superior foresight and legal reasoning he'd saved Israel from being forever trapped in the partition map—by its own top lawyers.





A map of Palestine in 1949 showing, in green, the territory allotted to the

Jewish state under the 1947 UN partition plan and, in pink, additional areas won by Israel in its War of Independence.

VII. The Declaration's Final Draft

In the early afternoon of May 14, Ben-Gurion presented the final draft of the declaration of statehood for approval by the People's Council, the precursor of the Knesset, meeting in the same Tel Aviv headquarters of the Jewish National Fund. Mention of the partition borders had disappeared from the draft. But the decision to omit them had been carried by a narrow vote, and there was some chance that the issue might become a bone of contention in the larger body.

To forestall that, Ben-Gurion placed an unexpected spin on the May 12 decision:

There was a proposal [in the People's Administration] to determine borders. And there was opposition to this proposal. We decided to *sidestep* this question (I use this word deliberately), for a simple reason: if the UN upholds its resolutions and commitments and keeps the peace and prevents bombing and implements its resolution forcefully—we, for our part (and I speak on behalf of the entire people), will respect all of its resolutions. Until now, the UN hasn't done so, and the matter has fallen to us. Therefore, not everything obligates us, and we left this issue open. We didn't say "No to the UN borders," but we also didn't say the opposite. We left the question open to developments.

This was a masterstroke of wording. The question of whether to commit to the partition borders in the declaration hadn't been sidestepped at all. It had been decided by a vote. But the vote itself substituted ambiguity for certainty. Until May 12, the state-in-waiting had been committed to the partition map. After May 12, that commitment depended on the UN doing something it should have done, but hadn't done, and likely wouldn't do. Ben-Gurion had created a new consensus—"of the entire people"—that the partition map might be revised.

Ben-Gurion had created a new consensus—"of the entire people"—that the partition map might be revised.

The members of the People's Council passed the draft declaration of statehood on the first ballot by a large majority, and on the second ballot unanimously. They then rushed to the Tel Aviv Museum (today, Independence Hall), where Ben-Gurion proclaimed the state of Israel.

VIII. An American Footnote

There is an American footnote to this story. The world had been led to expect that Israel would fill only the space on the map allotted to it by the partition plan. Washington was no exception; as Jewish statehood drew near, the U.S. government sought reassurances.

On May 13, the Jewish Agency's "ambassador" to Washington, Eliahu Epstein (later Eilat), received a phone call from Clark Clifford, special counsel to President Truman and a keen supporter of Zionism. Clifford was working to persuade Truman to recognize the Jewish state immediately upon its birth. He instructed Epstein to write formally to Truman and ask for U.S. recognition as soon as the state was declared.

Clifford would later recall telling Epstein that "it was particularly important that the new state claim nothing beyond the boundaries outlined in the UN resolution of November 29, 1947, because those boundaries were the only ones which had been agreed to by everyone, including the Arabs, in any international forum." Epstein also received a phone call from Loy Henderson, director of Near Eastern affairs at the State Department, and no friend of Zionism, wishing "to ascertain [the] boundaries of [the] new state."

In replying to Henderson, Epstein, who probably hadn't heard Ben-Gurion's new formula, adhered to the previous policy line of the Jewish Agency: unconditional acceptance of the UN map. Similarly, in his letter to Truman seeking recognition, he informed the president that Israel had been declared "within frontiers approved by the [UN] General Assembly." Washington's *de-facto* recognition of Israel followed almost immediately.

In reality, the state of Israel hadn't been declared in *any* borders, giving its critics a basis for later claims that the United States had been misled into recognizing the state based on a false representation. But who could blame Epstein for not knowing that Ben-Gurion had shifted Israel's position at the last moment? Amid the political and practical preparations for the declaration, Tel Aviv was in turmoil and Epstein had no contact with Shertok, his superior—to whom he would apologize that same day for writing to Truman on his own accord.

Ben-Gurion hoped that the partition map would be revised by Israeli victories; Loy Henderson and others hoped it would be redrawn by Israeli *defeats*. It was Ben-Gurion who would be vindicated.

But on May 14 the United States hadn't recognized Israel's borders, either. It simply "recognize[d] the provisional government as the *de-facto* authority of the new state of Israel." That formula actually consoled some, like Henderson, who opposed American recognition altogether. They could now hope that the Jewish state, following invasion by Arab armies,

might be reduced to *narrower* borders than those of the partition plan, especially in the Negev. If the Arabs took Jewish territory—well, so be it: the United States hadn't recognized Israel's borders and certainly wouldn't guarantee them. So while Ben-Gurion hoped that the partition map would be revised by Israeli victories, Henderson and his kind hoped it would be redrawn by Israeli defeats.

In the end, Ben-Gurion would be vindicated, just as he would be vindicated in an ensuing contest with his own diplomats. The latter struggle was occasioned by the fact that the declaration's lack of a reference to borders did not pass without notice at the UN—and Abba Eban, then representing the new state at Lake Success, thought the lack should be rectified. On May 24, he messaged Shertok from New York:

Ambiguity in [independence] proclamation regarding frontiers much commented [by] delegations and exploited [by] opponents, possibly delaying recognition and restricting those received. We urge official statement defining frontiers [of] Israel in accordance with November [1947 UN] resolution.

Needless to say, this plea fell on deaf ears—fortunately so, as most Israelis today would agree. By the end of the war, Israel's territory had grown from 55 percent of mandatory Palestine (its share under the partition plan) to 78 percent. (See the accompanying map; the area in pink was apportioned to the Arab state by the UN in 1947, but annexed by Israel as a result of the 1948 war.)

IX. The Ben-Gurion of '68, the Ben-Gurion of '48

We began with the Ben-Gurion of 1968 who, in his old age, suggested that Israel could withdraw from territory it had conquered in June 1967 in return for “peace,” and who has posthumously become celebrated as a champion of territorial compromise. By now it should be clear that this image ill suits him.

Recall: it was Ben-Gurion who, in 1948, first set Israel on the course of annexing strategically vital territory occupied in a defensive war. The places that Israel occupied beyond its partition allotment, and which Ben-Gurion (as we saw) would list with such pride, constituted almost a quarter of the country. Only under immense external pressure did he withdraw from a single conquest: the northeastern corner of the Sinai, in 1949. West of the Jordan, he never backed down, or out.

True, he may have refrained (or, more accurately, been restrained) from taking even more territory that, at least in the estimate of his generals, Israeli forces could have occupied in late 1948 and early 1949. But territory, once occupied, never slipped from his grip.

In short, his recent transformation strains against history. Sharef summarized the significance of the May 12 session in this way: “If the state were to be brought into existence by force of arms, then its putative frontiers would have to be determined by the same means.” And this: the state of Israel “would rule over that part of Palestine which was to be conquered by the prowess of the sons and daughters of Israel.” That position became inscribed in Israel’s declaration of statehood, not in words but in their absence—an omission effected by Ben-Gurion himself and validated by a crucial if narrow vote.

Once we dispense with the story of the vote that didn’t happen, and focus on the vote that did, May 12 emerges as a microcosm of the modern history of Israel.

This is Ben-Gurion’s record. Whether it should be considered all or part of his legacy is a matter of political preference. But, one way or another, this year’s 70th anniversary of Israel’s independence invites a reappraisal of May 12, 1948. Once we dispense with the story of the vote that didn’t happen, and focus on the vote that did, May 12 emerges as a microcosm of the modern history of Israel.

Israeli Jews have been virtually unanimous in their zeal for sovereignty and independence. It’s never been a question, and it’s needed no affirmation by vote. By contrast, the territorial extent of the state has always been a question, and one that divides Israel almost down the middle. It can be resolved only by a democratic process. That process was inaugurated by the vote on May 12 seven decades ago, and continues to this day.

ISRAEL'S SITUATION TODAY LOOKS MUCH AS BEN-GURION ENVISIONED IT

<https://mosaicmagazine.com/response/israel-zionism/2018/04/israels-situation-today-looks-much-as-ben-gurion-envisioned-it/>

He wasn't a prophet, but his strategies for Israel's survival had a profound influence on leaders who came after him, left and right.

April 30, 2018 | Martin Kramer

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This is a response to *The May 1948 Vote that Made the State of Israel*, originally published in *Mosaic* in April 2018

Since publication of my [essay](#), “The May 1948 Vote that Made the State of Israel,” the date (by the Hebrew calendar) of Israel’s 70th anniversary has come and gone. Among the many commemorative events, Israel’s cabinet held a festive session in Independence Hall on Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv, the place where David Ben-Gurion declared the state on May 14, 1948. On display at the center of the cabinet table, courtesy of the state archives, was the Declaration of Independence itself. The building will be open through the summer for extended hours and is then slated to close for renovation, after which it will perhaps become the national museum of Israel’s birth—something the country has never had.



David Ben-Gurion with his bodyguard by the Sea of Galilee in 1969. The National Library of Israel, Dan Hadani's Archive [IPPA Staff].

As I showed in my essay, however, it was not at this building but at the building of the Jewish National Fund, tucked away on a residential Tel Aviv street, that the state was actually born.

There, in the days immediately preceding May 14, the People's Administration—the pre-state cabinet—made the preparations for independence. A marathon session lasting a whole day led up to the brief 32-minute ceremony in which the state was declared.

The May 14 ceremony took place before the public and the cameras. But the prior deliberations, behind closed doors, are much more difficult to reconstruct. In my essay, peering behind those doors, I tried to dispel a common myth about the deliberations and also to shift attention to a forgotten truth. I thank Benny Morris, Efraim Karsh, and Avi Shilon—the three respondents in *Mosaic* to my essay—for helping to complete the picture in informed and interesting ways.

On the events immediately preceding Israel's declaration of statehood, and especially on my account of the proceedings of the People's Administration on May 12, 1948, there is no disagreement between me and my respondents. [Efraim Karsh](#) gives me credit for “meticulously overturning the conventional wisdom” that what hung in the balance in that session was the decision to declare independence at all, a decision finally secured by David Ben-Gurion in the narrowest of votes. As I showed, there is no strong evidence for such a vote having taken place. But I also named other Israeli historians who did the actual overturning before me, in some cases decades ago. Remarkably, until publication of my *Mosaic* essay, neither the correction nor even the existence of a debate over the facts had found its way into English.

What my essay did do was to focus on another, real vote in that same session, in this case over whether to include language in the declaration specifying the borders of the new state—and in particular whether to commit the state to the borders laid out in the November 1947 partition plan promulgated by the United Nations and accepted by the Zionists. The cabinet's decision was to do neither. My discussion of this subject prompted two of my respondents, Benny Morris and Avi Shilon, to delve into Ben-Gurion's view of borders, both in 1948 (Morris) and in 1967 and more generally (Shilon).

More can and should be said about all of this, and now is the perfect opportunity to say it.

To begin with, and quite apart from Ben-Gurion's own views, it's important to clarify a term employed by [Benny Morris](#) to describe Zionist ideology and practice as a whole. Morris calls Zionism “expansionist,” a word associated in many minds with aggression and appropriation—and therefore, it seems to me, in serious need of qualification.

Zionist settlement of the land prior to 1948 “expanded” in territory only where it was licensed to do so by the ruling powers in Palestine: the Ottoman empire until World War I and Britain (on behalf of the League of Nations) after the postwar peace settlement. In both periods, the “expansion” occurred through land purchases. (The terms of the League of Nations mandate

to Britain slightly widened that scope, expressly charging the British to “encourage . . . close settlement by Jews on the land, including state lands and waste lands not required for public purposes.”) In no period before 1948 did Zionists expand Jewish holdings by aggression or appropriation.

Moreover, as Morris himself emphasizes, in 1936 and 1947 the mainstream Zionist movement accepted the narrow territorial limits to a Jewish state that would be defined by partition plans.

Yes, the Zionist movement always sought to maximize the territorial extent of the Jewish home or state. Until the Holocaust, Zionists leaders anticipated the proximate arrival of many millions of Jews. But until 1948, the movement pursued that aim only by the power of the purse and the politics of persuasion.

Only in 1948, when Arab militias and armies invaded the Jewish state, did Israel expand by force, during a counterattack in a war thrust upon it by enemies intent on its destruction. It “expanded” because the borders assigned to it in the 1947 partition plan made sense only in the theoretical climate of peaceful cooperation between the Jewish and Arab states originally envisioned by that plan. Those borders couldn’t be defended in an actual climate of war, when Jews living outside them were coming under attack.

International-relations theorists have stipulated that states with vulnerable borders and intractable enemies are driven to improve their position through “defensive expansionism.” The logic, for Israel, has been explained by MIT scholar Stephen van Evera, author of *Causes of War: Power and the Roots of Conflict*, who writes that “Israel’s geography is especially unfortunate: physically small, its frontiers have few obstacles and much of its industry and population lie on exposed frontiers.” Moreover, “Israel has long embraced an offensive military strategy mainly because Israel’s tiny size, long and unprotected borders, elongated shape, and incapacity to sustain a long war of attrition made defense too difficult.”

These words were written about the armistice lines drawn at the cessation of hostilities in Israel’s 1948-49 War of Independence; they were even truer about the 1947 partition-plan borders. Since the Arab states, both in 1949 and after the Six-Day War in June 1967, refused to accept their defeat and sue for peace, the territories gained by Israel in those conflicts remained valuable for the state’s defense.

I’m simplifying a complex story, but the bottom line is this: Israel is larger today because Arabs tried to strangle it when it was smaller and more vulnerable. Is that expansionism? Perhaps—but by necessity.

And what of Ben-Gurion? The crude version, formulated by the Oxford polemicist Avi Shlaim, is that he was a “land-grabber.” By contrast, [Avi Shilon](#) in his response has provided a

learned and nuanced account of Ben-Gurion's approach to borders in general. The main takeaway: he didn't see them through the prism of ideology.

In antiquity, Ben-Gurion determined, the areas under Hebrew sovereignty had varied according to historical circumstances, so there were no fixed "historic" borders that the modern state of Israel needed to "restore." Nor was the state compelled to incorporate all of the "Land of Israel," if doing so contradicted state interests.

True, in practice, the gap for Ben-Gurion between the state's borders and the land's borders—or at least the borders of the Palestine mandate—tended only to shrink. This was because of the absence of what he called "true peace." For Ben-Gurion, each Arab rejection of peace and each Israeli sacrifice in war needed to be translated into a corresponding gain of territory for Israel. So, in 1947, he offered peace on the basis of the partition plan; but by 1949 he offered it only on the basis of the armistice lines. Again, in May 1967, just before the Six-Day War, he told an interviewer that "we are interested in peace on the basis of the [1949] status quo, but if the Arabs are interested not in peace but in war—we will fight, and then perhaps there will be a different status quo."

The Arabs could have stopped this cycle at any time. Instead, they gambled territory in the hope of crushing Israel, and kept doubling their bets. Ben-Gurion didn't grab land. The better gambler, he won it.

Let's look a little closer by returning specifically to Ben-Gurion in 1948 and 1949. As I wrote in my essay, even though a commitment to the partition-plan borders appeared in the draft declaration of statehood presented to the People's Administration, Ben-Gurion had the foresight to argue that it be struck from the final draft—a move confirmed by the vote of Israel's proto-cabinet. This set the stage for the subsequent Israeli annexation of swaths of territory allotted by the UN plan to the envisioned Arab state and the *corpus separatum* of Jerusalem, increasing the area of the Jewish state by more than a third.

Those who today invoke Ben-Gurion as some sort of progenitor of Israel's "peace camp"—a subject I'll return to—often claim to his credit that in 1948-9 he had the wisdom not to press Israel's advantage and go on to occupy the West Bank and Gaza. According to this narrative, Ben-Gurion understood that the addition of those territories, teeming with Arab inhabitants and refugees, would have undermined the Jewish majority of the new state. If only, such adherents of today's peace camp cry, we could have exhibited the same wisdom in 1967!

But Ben-Gurion's actual record is much more complex. Morris reminds us that on September 26, 1948, Ben-Gurion, by then the prime minister, proposed to his own cabinet that Israel launch an offensive directed toward the West Bank. By this time, Israel had the upper hand in the war, and was fully mobilized (with a force of nearly 90,000). But there had been a respite

in the fighting, and, in Ben-Gurion's assessment, Israeli forces could finally take the Arab-held fortress of Latrun astride the main road to Jerusalem, a bastion that had withstood six Israeli assaults.

Nor was Latrun the only object of his ambition. According to the minutes of that session, Ben-Gurion thought that it would be

possible to move the eastern central border much deeper, if not past the mountain crest [of the West Bank], then at least up to it, so the coastal strip won't be too narrow. We can move the Jezreel Valley very much farther south, if not to Nablus; we can widen the corridor to Jerusalem at least to Ramallah so that the line from Bir Naballah to Ramallah will be in our hands.

The following day, he also told the Provisional State Council (the precursor to the Knesset) that in the event of renewed fighting, it would be possible to "liberate" all of Jerusalem, including the Old City.

As Morris writes in his book *1948: The First Arab-Israeli War*, "it is not completely clear whether Ben-Gurion wanted the IDF to conquer the whole of the West Bank or only a large part of it, with or without eastern Jerusalem." Ben-Gurion would later assert, just before the Six-Day War, that "had the government heeded me [in 1948], not only would [eastern] Jerusalem be included in the state today, but also all the area of Ramallah, Hebron, and more." In 1969, he defined the "more" as the area from "Ramallah down to Jericho and the Dead Sea." One way or another, if Ben-Gurion had had his way, much of the West Bank would have been absorbed into Israel; perhaps Samaria would have been left as an Arab enclave.

But several ministers put up stiff resistance to Ben-Gurion's proposal. They fretted that another attack on Latrun would fail; that the operation would turn into an unpredictable war on all fronts; that the effort would come at the expense of a needed offensive in the Negev; and that Israel would be punished internationally for pressing still farther beyond the partition borders. When Ben-Gurion put his Latrun offensive to a vote, he lost, seven to five. Even the other members of his own party, most prominently Moshe Shertok (Sharett), voted against him.

Israeli historians have been perplexed by this episode. When Ben-Gurion truly wanted something, he usually came up with a practical plan and cornered the main actors in advance. But before this vote he didn't do the preliminary work or present a detailed plan for the offensive. This has led to speculation that he himself was of two minds about it. Most historians, including Morris and Shilon, have chosen to believe that Ben-Gurion didn't *really* want the offensive he proposed. But no one knows. Perhaps he did want to act, but (for once) miscalculated.

What does seem certain is this: Ben-Gurion wasn't worried that conquering more of the West

Bank would make the Jews a minority in their new state. On that day in late September 1948, not even his opponents raised demographic concerns. Why not? As Ben-Gurion explained to a student group connected with his Mapai party in 1961, had the offensive gone forward, “the Arabs would have fled from Hebron and Bethlehem. Just as Ramleh [a town whose Arabs were evacuated by Israel in July 1948] is today Jewish—those living there don’t imagine it was once a city without a single Jew—so it would have been with Hebron.”

In 1962, similarly, he would tell a journalist that in 1948 “I assumed, not with absolute certainty but with reasonable probability, that most of the Arabs of Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Hebron would flee, just as the Arabs had fled from Lydda, Ramleh, Jaffa, Haifa, Tiberias, and Safed.” In Israel’s first cabinet, all of the ministers would have thought like Ben-Gurion: in a situation of renewed war, the Arabs would flee, because they usually did.

In the years immediately following, Ben-Gurion sought only quiet so as to permit the absorption of mass immigration. The 1949 armistice agreement with Jordan, leaving the West Bank and the Old City in Jordanian hands, had bought Israel some respite, and he defended the agreement against his critics partly on demographic grounds: “A Jewish state . . . in all of [the land west of the Jordan] is impossible, if it is to be democratic, because the number of Arabs exceeds the number of Jews.”

But a window of opportunity opened in the mid-1950s. Jordan’s monarchy seemed shaky; perhaps it would fall. Ben-Gurion no longer expected the miracle of Arab flight to be repeated. But if Jordan weakened or collapsed, Israel would have to fill the vacuum and remain the only military force west of the river. His solution: West Bank autonomy under Israel.

Ben-Gurion didn’t confine this idea to his diary, but floated it as a trial balloon with the powers. In 1956, he proposed what he called a “fantastic” plan to French prime minister Guy Mollet: Jordan would be dismantled, Iraq would take over the East Bank, and the West Bank would become an autonomous area under Israel. Two years later, when Jordan looked even more vulnerable, Ben-Gurion informed John Foster Dulles, the American secretary of state, that since “the [West Bank] belonged to the land mass of Palestine,” it should be made “an autonomous political unit with which there could be a union with Israel.”

Mollet put him off, and Dulles didn’t bite; nothing came of these notions. But Ben-Gurion didn’t drop the matter at home, and in 1962 he began to speak and leak about the 1948 cabinet debate. In his version, he had been eager and willing to take a chunk of the West Bank, but weak-kneed ministers foiled his plans. Those who’d voted against him had made a mistake that would be “lamented for generations.”

This claim originated in some political score-settling, but in making it Ben-Gurion did much to delegitimize the aging 1949 armistice lines. What were young student leaders of Mapai to

think when Ben-Gurion stood before a map, and showed them how much farther east the border *might* have run had he not been outvoted on September 26, 1948? (“The majority is permitted to err,” he said with an avuncular wink.)

By the early 1960s, then, Ben-Gurion, the great architect of the status quo, preferred to be seen publicly as its critic, as someone who had warned of its inherent dangers only to be overruled by a majority of his lessers. Yes, he hadn’t taken the West Bank when he could have. But by the 1960s, this dereliction didn’t carry with it much blame, since he repeatedly claimed that Israel *should* have taken it.

There is a significant addendum to the West Bank story. Had Ben-Gurion had his druthers in 1949, Israel would have annexed Gaza. The presence of a standing Egyptian force in Gaza, so close to Tel Aviv, constituted a strategic threat of the first order, and he was even willing to make Gaza and its refugees a part of Israel in order to push the state’s coastal border southward.

In 1949, he informally told a member of the UN’s Palestine Conciliation Commission that “if [the Egyptians] give us Gaza, we will not refuse, and then of course we would accept it with all its inhabitants. We will not expel them.” Israel then formally proposed this to the UN commission, but Egypt refused to contemplate withdrawal.

He didn’t give up. In March 1955, as defense minister in Sharett’s government, Ben-Gurion proposed to occupy Gaza. The matter came up in the cabinet, and provoked a heated discussion: what would Israel do with Gaza’s large Arab population? He suggested leaving leave a corridor to facilitate their flight to the West Bank. Other ministers objected that too few would flee, or that the Jordanians would refuse to admit them, and then what? Ben-Gurion:

I assume that some of them will flee to Hebron. . . . We won’t go to the [Jordanian] Arab Legion and say: “Take them.” We won’t conduct negotiations. The borders are open. I know [the Arabs in Gaza]. They will flee to [Hebron]. Perhaps the Legion might shoot at them. . . . But I don’t imagine they will. . . . If there’s an outcry, there will be an outcry. Afterward, they’ll get used to it.

What’s telling is that even in making this proposal, Ben-Gurion insisted that he had no expansionist designs, and that the state didn’t need territory per se. It needed Gaza for its defense.

The cabinet rejected Ben-Gurion’s proposal nine to four. In the 1956 Sinai war, as prime minister again, he did take Gaza, but was forced to give it up the following year. Yet Gaza would remain, for Ben-Gurion, a place destined for inclusion in Israel—as we shall shortly see.

This brings us to Ben-Gurion's position after the 1967 war. Two decades after that conflict, in a 1987 [article](#) in the *New York Review of Books* titled "Israel: The Tragedy of Victory," the gadfly American rabbi Arthur Hertzberg would recall hearing a speech by Ben-Gurion in July 1967 at the Labor training institute Beit Berl outside Tel Aviv. Hertzberg's summary:

Ben-Gurion insisted that all of the territories that had been captured [in the June Six-Day War] had to be given back, very quickly, for holding on to them would distort, and might ultimately destroy, the Jewish state. He made only one exception of consequence: the Israelis should not relinquish control of the whole of Jerusalem. Ben-Gurion's most striking assertion that night was that he did not expect immediate peace with the Arabs; for its own inner health, he said, Israel needed only to give back the territories very soon in return for a workable set of armistice arrangements.

That July speech, Hertzberg insisted, had "become my most vivid memory of Israel in 1967."

In 2003, Hertzberg repeated this story in the introduction to a manifesto entitled *The Fate of Zionism*. In that "unforgettable encounter," he now wrote, Ben-Gurion had demanded that Israel "give back, immediately, all the territory that it had captured" except Jerusalem; otherwise, "it would be heading for historic disaster." With his "wrathful cry that the most glorious of Israel's victories could turn out to be even more poisonous than defeat," Ben-Gurion, according to Hertzberg, "was the true Zionist prophet" who "planted in me a recurring discomfort." Thus, when Hertzberg himself later called for a Palestinian state, he claimed he was simply "follow[ing] after David Ben-Gurion, who dissented, at the end of his life, from the platform of the very Labor party he had helped to fashion."

The problem with this story is that Ben-Gurion never uttered the words Hertzberg attributed to him. The transcript of his speech, delivered to a visiting group of Conservative American rabbis on July 12, 1967, is [preserved](#), and while it may not be complete, it bears not the faintest resemblance to Hertzberg's account of it. There is no mention of the West Bank or its inhabitants, no mention of urgent withdrawal, no victor's remorse. When Ben-Gurion wasn't lauding Israel's astounding victory, or reminiscing about his own past, he was haranguing the rabbis over Israel's desperate need for Jewish immigration from America so that it could rapidly settle 100,000 Jews in unified Jerusalem. "Ben-Gurion Calls for Mass Immigration in Conservative Rabbinic Seminar," ran the headline in the Israeli daily *Davar* two days later. If Ben-Gurion had said anything remotely resembling what Hertzberg claimed he said, that headline would have been radically different.

Nor does Hertzberg's account bear the slightest resemblance to Ben-Gurion's own precise statement of what he thought should be done with the occupied territories, laid out in a public letter composed with all the force of his considerable personal authority. Sent to the editors of

the Hebrew press, the letter was published in nearly all of the major dailies on June 19, nine days after the war's end. "If Egypt agrees to conclude a peace treaty with Israel," he wrote,

and commits to our freedom of navigation, not just in the straits of Eilat but also in the Suez Canal, we will be ready to evacuate the Sinai desert immediately after the signing of the treaty. . . . If Syria agrees to sign a peace treaty, and commits itself to preventing attacks on Israeli settlements by Syria's inhabitants and from within its territory, we will evacuate the Syrian [Golan] Heights now in our hands.

Armistice agreements, as in 1949? Hardly: Ben-Gurion was willing to return territory only in return for full peace treaties. "I am not sure the other side is prepared for that," he added.

In fact, there was no difference between this position and the Israeli cabinet [decision](#) of June 19: Egypt and Syria would be offered full withdrawal for full peace. But for Ben-Gurion it didn't take long for Syria's Golan Heights to be removed from the table: after a visit there in August, he concluded that Israel should settle and annex them.

As for Jordan, Ben-Gurion would return *nothing*. The Old City of Jerusalem and its surroundings would remain entirely in Israeli hands (it had been Israel's "eternal capital" since the time of King David). When it came to the rest of the West Bank,

We will propose to the inhabitants . . . to choose representatives with whom we will conduct negotiations on a West Bank autonomy (excluding Jerusalem and its surroundings), which will be tied to Israel in an economic alliance, and which will have its outlet to the sea via Haifa or Ashdod or Gaza. A Jewish army will be stationed on the western bank of the Jordan River to protect the independence of the autonomous West Bank. . . . All the Jews who [once] lived in Hebron and its surroundings will be allowed to return to their former homes, even after the West Bank is granted internal autonomy.

He was even more specific in an address to an Israel Bonds delegation in August. In his view, the West Bank should be an "autonomous though not independent province." This scheme for the Palestinians hardly constituted "dissent" à la Hertzberg. It basically tracked Ben-Gurion's proposals of 1956 and 1958, and also the earliest form of the plan for the West Bank drawn up after the Six-Day War by then-Minister of Labor Yigal Allon.

And once again there was another newly occupied territory, in addition to eastern Jerusalem, that Ben-Gurion proposed to annex outright:

The Gaza Strip will remain in Israel, and efforts will be made to settle its refugees in the autonomous West Bank, or in other Arab territory, with the assent of the refugees and the assistance of Israel.

Picking up here on his earlier ideas about Gaza, he still thought it crucial to extend Israel's

coast all the way down to the Egyptian border, even if that meant assuming responsibility for (the dispersal of?) Gaza's 350,000 Arabs.

In sum, in Ben-Gurion's plan, no part of the Land of Israel west of the Jordan would be "given back" to anyone. Israel would patrol its entire eastern frontier, the West Bank would become a subordinate "province" of Israel, and the Gaza portion, evacuated of some of its Arabs, would be annexed outright.

In the following months, Ben-Gurion didn't deviate from this plan. On August 1 (that is, *after* his Beit Berl remarks), he participated in a Q&A session with students of the Hebrew University. Repeating every one of his points, he added: "In my opinion, the Sinai, the West Bank, the [Golan] Heights, and the Gaza Strip can wait; we have time. But we have to work immediately to build Jerusalem." So much for acting to return territory "very quickly," "very soon," or "immediately." Indeed, as a recent study [demonstrates](#), Ben-Gurion invested his greatest energies after the war in plans for absorbing all of united Jerusalem into Israel—including such far-out proposals as demolishing the walls of the Old City. More than two years later, in 1969, his position still hadn't changed:

If there were a chance for "true peace" (and by true peace I mean stability and common action in economics, politics, and education), I would be for the return of territories (except for the Old City of Jerusalem, the Golan Heights, and Gaza). But unfortunately I don't see any proximate chance for true peace, and thus no room to speak about return of territories.

By 1971, his view hadn't much altered. He had stopped mentioning Gaza alongside Jerusalem and the Golan Heights as territory Israel had to keep. But his concept of "true peace" remained absolute. Asked by an American senator what it meant, he answered: "Nu, it's fairly simple. Peace such as that which exists between Belgium and Holland."

But this wasn't his final stop. As time wore on, and the wait for "true peace" lengthened, Ben-Gurion envisioned still more revisions to the pre-1967 status quo. In 1972, he was asked whether he'd changed his views during the five years since the war. Ben-Gurion replied that in 1967 he'd been willing to return all of the Sinai, but Egypt had still refused to make peace.

In the meantime, we are settled in the Sinai, and important things are being done there. There is a big difference between returning barren desert and returning settled areas. I would not order the dismantlement of the settlements in the Sinai and the return of territories to Egypt. Something changed in Sinai since the Six-Day War, and things continue to change. It's one thing to return desert, another to return territory settled by Jews.

When asked whether his revised view included the West Bank, and particularly Hebron, he

added: “Provision should be made for a large and growing Jewish settlement in Hebron that should be able, in the fullness of time, to become a part of the state of Israel.” This repositioning didn’t pass without notice outside Israel: “Ben-Gurion Switches on Annexation,” announced a headline in the *New York Post*. It was the last major statement by Ben-Gurion on borders; he died the following year.

So Hertzberg’s Ben-Gurion—advocate of an immediate, unilateral, and almost total Israeli withdrawal—was a figment of the rabbi’s imagination. But Hertzberg didn’t consciously fabricate him. (I allow myself to say this as someone who briefly had Hertzberg as a teacher.) He simply did what many do when they want to validate their own political notions: they trace them back to a (mis)quotable “founding father.” No doubt, Hertzberg’s encounter with Ben-Gurion—the “George Washington of Israel”—was as “unforgettable” and “vivid” as he claimed. But two decades after the fact, he remembered only those fragments of Ben-Gurion’s remarks that he could distort and cram into his own by-then alienated verdict on 1967: “It would have been better had the Six-Day War ended in a draw and not in a series of stunning victories.”

In my essay, I cited the promotional materials for the film *Ben-Gurion: Epilogue*, which asserted that Ben-Gurion’s “clear voice provides a surprising vision for today’s crucial decisions and the future of Israel.” The film distorts that voice through editorial selection. But once the voice is restored in full, it’s striking how closely Israel’s present-day situation conforms to Ben-Gurion’s preferences as he expressed them right after the Six-Day War.

Full withdrawal from Sinai for full peace with Egypt? Fulfilled. Annexation of the Golan Heights? Done. Jewish settlement across unified Jerusalem? Largely accomplished. A Palestinian autonomy, but not a state, on the West Bank? Reality. A grip on Gaza? Israel still has it.

Ben-Gurion wasn’t a prophet, but his survival strategies for Israel had a profound influence on leaders who came after him, left and right. They usually didn’t stray far from the furrow he plowed, and when they did, new leaders quickly arose who corrected course. No one can say what Ben-Gurion would think of “today’s crucial decisions,” in the phrase of the film’s promoters. But it isn’t hard to argue that Israel’s present situation is a fairly straight-line outcome of the mix of positions he took in 1967.

It is also an outcome of the stand he took on May 12, 1948, when he argued for omitting any mention of borders in Israel’s Declaration of Independence. “Why commit ourselves?” he asked. Assuming that time would work in Israel’s favor, he refused to despair in the face of demography: given the right policies, more Jews would come, more Jews would be born, and some Arabs might “flee.” Borders could be adjusted accordingly, in a dynamic process without end. After 1967, this is what he wrote about the emergent voices who would become the “peace

camp”:

The “moral” people who reject the expansion of borders in any historical circumstances are unaware that they abet our enemies, who [still] dream of the territories that were already in our possession [in 1949] either in accord with the UN [partition plan] or not.

So a principled refusal to expand simply invited enemies to dream of taking back what they had already lost. And those enemies would make peace only to prevent Israel’s further expansion. So why commit? And why discount the price of withdrawal? “It is important to stress,” emphasized the late Shimon Peres, “that Ben-Gurion’s condition for returning the territories was full peace.” There were supporters of unilateral withdrawal even in Ben-Gurion’s day. He wasn’t among them.

I should be clear that in saying all of this, my aim has been the modest one of setting the historical record straight. There are those who would muster Ben-Gurion’s insights from 1937, or 1948, or 1967, or 1972 in support of some present position. Nothing could be more foreign to Ben-Gurion’s own approach, as outlined in the splendid quotation cited by Avi Shilon to the effect that all things change, and minds must rush to change with them. The state of Israel was fortunate to have David Ben-Gurion at the moment when his genius and its needs converged. But his corpus of writings, quotes, and misquotes is no substitute for leadership today.